

The Rescue

Fiction by

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They were seeing cold moonlight on paint starved wooden houses; it made the houses look much better than in daylight. The woman in the passenger seat of the sedan held the five year old boy close for comfort as much as warmth. The child whispered something now and then and the woman whispered her answer back. They were watching the house across and down the street. It was the biggest house they had seen coming into this neighborhood several blocks back. It was a square house with two full stories and lights showing in all the windows, upstairs and down. Yellow light that flickered and cast shadows on the curtains as people inside moved about. The automobile they were in was parked on the wrong side of this dead end street and the house they were watching was the last on the other side. Beyond the house, railroad tracks ran perpendicular to the street where the 1930 Ford sedan was parked with its two anxious occupants. This section of the railroad was a switcher yard and small buildings and apparatus could be made out if one looked intently. Near the top on one metal pole between several tracks a single green light burned unblinking. That, and the yellow windows, was the only light other than the luminous full moon, it was two o'clock and most people had no business being awake this time of the morning.

This journey began much earlier that evening. A week back, after the two men came home after working all day, they met at one or the other's house. This evening, plans were made sitting around the oak dining room table while drinking beer and talking about the difficulties of the coming travel. Many families made illicit "home brew" and wine while keeping the product hidden from the law and neighbors during those baker's dozen years of the "noble experiment" called prohibition. After it ended, drinking anything alcoholic still had the twinge of doing something illegal.

A map, courtesy of Esso Oil Company, was spread on the table and the recommended route marked with heavy pencil lines. The journey's end was Quinnimont, West Virginia and a trip of a hundred and thirty miles had to be plotted and all usual sudden needs, flat tires, radiators boiling over, dead batteries and running out of gas, talked about before they might happen. All the families these two men were friends with were poor, made worse by the depression. The depression made work practically impossible to find and both these men had regular paydays. One had better employment than the other but any job with steady pay was highly valued. This outing was planned for Friday night since they believed more people would have to be reckoned with on Saturday night. Tires, even new ones, couldn't be relied on to hold up on long trips. The ones on the Ford were a long way from new. They decided to strap another spare to the one mounted on the back of the car. Two tires and the patching kit should be sufficient to get them there and back. They would just have to chance gasoline stations along the route. Since the woman insisted she and the child were going, a spare gasoline container inside the car was out as well as strapping it on the running board.

There would be enough danger without the possibility of adding another.

The woman tried to talk her husband out of the trip during the week it was planned, but he insisted he was going to help his friend. Because, he said, he believed the friend would do the same for him. She gave up trying to convince him not to go, however, she insisted she and the boy were going with them. She knew nothing of the danger but her husband knew taking her and the boy was the only way the trip was going to take place. Friday evening, after a supper of pinto beans, corn bread and jam, the four set off, all looking forward to the adventure. The child stood in the front car floorboard watching the roadway ahead. He would point out things he saw he believed might interest his mother, who had the back seat to herself. She had not been privy to many of the discussions the men had. She didn't know and would not have approved of the five shot 38 caliber Iver Johnson Owlhead pistol her husband's friend had in his trousers pocket. To her, they were simply going to Quinnimont to pick up his two daughters. The actuality was, the daughters had ran away, one sixteen years old and the other fifteen. After much enquiring, their father got word the girls were working in a whorehouse in Quinnimont. He was told it was owned and operated by a black man that kept the girls in enslavement, servicing anyone that had the cash or merchandise to trade. He was known as "that crazy nigger" and had the reputation of cutting anyone that crossed him. The thirty- eight Owlhead made the men feel secure if it came to confronting him.

The switching station assured many whorehouse patrons from the railroaders and the

freight and coal trains that stopped sometimes just to avail themselves of the liquor and services of the floozies. It was a house of ill renown that stayed busy by word of mouth. The two girls were told they could make a lot of money by working there. They were both naked in bed with a boarder their family had taken in to supplement their household expenses; it wasn't such a stretch wanting to get paid for what they were doing right then for free. The boarder even arranged transportation to Quinnimont by rail. Their fare was they had to service the freight train crew of four while getting there. Again, it seemed an acceptable trade-off to the youngsters.

The car driver, Russell, husband of the woman, obeyed the speed limits but the woman complained about driving too fast down the mountains they crossed. She made him stop at the top of one and she and the boy walked down one that had hairpin turns. This took awhile and, while waiting at the bottom, the men got out of the car and stretched their legs and relieved themselves into the thicket next to the two lane road. The father of the runaway girls took out a pint flask from his inside coat pocket, and they took turns drinking until it was half consumed. The last half was retained for before entering the whorehouse when they may need additional courage. The woman and child arrived, and they resumed the journey. The woman smelled the corn liquor but said nothing on account of the boy. The child was sagacious and conflict, especially between his parents, upset him and brought on asthma attacks.

The "town" of Quinnimont wasn't much to look at. Railroad shotgun houses for a

couple of blocks and a company owned grocery store with a gas pump. Considerably further past the store was the sizeable substantially constructed railroad yardmaster building with lights on inside and out. The store was closed and no lights in any of the houses. After the town and before the yardmaster building the road took a steep right turn up the hill and then straightened out around the side of the mountain. The report they had was the house they were looking for was on a road off to the left of this highway. They took the first road to the left and it ended after several hundred yards in a gully filled with junk, trash and garbage. Taking the next road to the left there were small wood houses for about a half mile and then, after a vacant field, the two story much larger house, a porch across the front with a balcony atop with railings. There was lots of gingerbread trim around the porch corners and eaves. The flat roof was smaller and it, too, had an ornamental railing all around, with fish scale siding on the angle sides leading to it. It was situated close alongside the railroad tracks. Broad stairs led to the front porch, a wire fence all but hidden by vines and weeds enclosed the yard and the gate was standing open, they were relieved believing they wouldn't have to be concerned about a guard dog.

The driver had turned off the headlights and engine when he believed they were on the correct road and coasted down the street navigating by the bright moonlight to where they were now parked. The street was dirt but some macadam could be seen between the shallow ruts. They all sat looking at the house.

The woman was first to speak.

"Russell did you know we were coming here to try and get the girls out of *that* place?"

"Whatdda' you mean *that* place, honey?"

"You know *precisely* what I mean. You think you're gonna' just walk in there and ask the girls to go with you?"

The girl's father spoke, "We wuz hoping they might want to come home after they found out what kind of life they had in one of them places."

Thankfully, the child had fallen asleep and wasn't disturbed by the discussion even though it was said almost in whispers.

"We're here now so we might as well get this over with." Russell mumbled and the two men exited the car and that woke the child up. The woman got into the front seat and held the child.

"Momma?"

"I'm right here. Don't be afraid. Daddy and Houston are just going to find Agnes and Alley. They'll be back in a little while. Get up close to me and we'll keep each other warm."

Both men sported wrinkled dark suits with pistol-leg pants, so called because the crease had long ago left, white shirts and neither had a necktie. Russell was tall and slim, over six feet and a hundred and ninety pounds of muscle and bone. Houston was short and heavysset, five foot six and weighed about two hundred and twenty pounds. He was a railroad detective and had no compunction to beating people to an inch of their lives when he caught them trespassing on railroad property. They walked quickly

to the gate, stopped and passed the half pint, each trying to hide it so the woman in the automobile wouldn't see. Finishing the bottle, it was tossed in the weeds of the front yard and the two men ascended the steps to the front porch. They could see people moving around through the oval beveled glass in the front door and hear a Victrola playing some string band music. Houston twisted the door knob and took two steps into the house. Russell, right behind him, closed the door and they both stood looking, trying to appear as if they had been there before. The coal oil lamps and the cigarette smoke made everyone and everything appear a light umber. There were a dozen people, six men, six women, and eight were dancing or attempting to. The other two couples, the women sitting on the men's laps in over-stuffed chairs. Two white women and one white man, all the rest black.

None of these people were Houston's daughters. An immense black man came through the open glass-paned hall doors from somewhere back in the premises and made his way through the dancers. He was wearing a checkered black and white shirt and his enormous black pants held up with wide bright green suspenders. White buck dress shoes finished the fashion statement. His skin was just as black as the squares of his shirt. A distinct citrus smell emanated from his wavy, shiny, slick-backed hair.

In a deep baritone voice he said, "One Dollar each, gentlemen. That's the cover charge and it pays for one drink. More shots are a quarter, the same with beer, the women three dollars paid in advance. The peanuts are free. Please try and keep the shells off the floor." All this was said in impeccable English.

"We're looking for a particular girl someone said worked here. Her name is Alley."

Houston blurted out.

"The ladies seldom use their real names, and we do not have anyone here by that name. One dollar each or *there is the door.*" The last sentence said not in the friendly demeanor of the others as he pointed with one chubby finger toward the front door. Houston grabbed the black man by the shirt and pulled him forward and jammed the pistol in his belly.

"Listen you fat black son-of-a-bitch I came here to get my daughters, and I ain't leaving without 'em. If you want to keep livin' and runnin' this place we are gonna to look in every room in this goddamn house. Now do you want to be a livin' nigger or what I call a good nigger?"

"Well, since you put it that way, I do not see I have much of a choice."

While this conversation was going on Russell was snapping his fingers and moving his hips to the beat of the music, trying to keep the dancers from noticing what was happening between the two men. The dance ended and the men dancers tumbled into the chairs and couches. The women went to the Victrola and one was winding it up while the other three were chatting and picking the next song they were going to play. Houston turned the black man around, pushed the gun into his back, and began pushing him across the living room toward the staircase to the upstairs. Without turning, Houston said loudly,

"Come on Russell; let's see what's available upstairs."

Upstairs were three doorways on each side of the long hallway, the stairway was

centered; railings on three sides and the hardwood floor ran around it. Two oil lamps with reflectors were eyelevel on each side of the hall. At the front and back of the hall were open doors with a claw-foot bathtub and commode partially showing.

Houston growled, "Where the hell do we start?"

"Any" the black man answered airily. "they are all being used. The door is left open when the room is not occupied."

"Open that first goddamn door," Houston told Russell. "and we'll start going down this side and on around to the other. Push it all the way open fast."

Russell clutched the door knob and pushed finding the door locked.

"It's locked, Houston."

Houston hissed to the black man, "Where is the fuckin' skeleton key?" Pushing the revolver into the fat of his waist.

In a deliberate manner the black man reached into the watch pocket of his trousers and pulled out the six inch steel key and gave it to Russell with a flourish. Russell put the key in the keyhole and, as quiet as he could, unlocked the door and shoved it open. The light in the room from the hallway open door and moonlight coming in the window showed two naked people on the bed in sexual intercourse. It took a few seconds before the black man on top realized there was additionally light in the room. He turned his head trying to make out the three people's faces before rolling off the woman. All three men looked at the face of the woman, then turned and left the room, shutting the door behind them. They went through this same procedure for the next

four rooms; if the woman was black they shut the door quickly and moved on. Some rooms took longer until they could make a determination because of what the couples were doing. Both men, now clearly disheartened, had only one more room to search for the girls.

"Do you suppose you might have got the wrong information, Houston?"

"Maybe." He answered angrily.

"If you two gentlemen would like to come downstairs, I will give you some libations on the house. Clearly, the woman you seek is not here."

"Shut up!" Houston hissed. ""We still have one more room."

Russell put the key in the lock and pushed the door open. The room was lighted by two oil lamps. The naked black man on the bed was lying on his back, one naked girl had her face in his crotch, her hair obscuring what she was doing, and the other girl, also naked, was lying beside him watching.

Houston recognized his daughters at the same time the oldest, lying beside the black man, recognized him.

"Alley!" "Daddy!" The words spoken simultaneously.

The other girl, Agnes, sat back on her feet on the bed and couldn't believe she was seeing her father. The black man bounded to the other side of the bed and said, "What the hell is going on here? Who the hell are these people?" He said toward the black man. "Get out! I paid for these two girls."

"Shut up and get the hell outta here before I decide to kill you, you black son-of-a-bitch." Houston said pointed the pistol at him. He grabbed his clothes and

shoes and left the room still naked.

Then to the girls, "Get your goddamn clothes on, and you're going home with me.

Right now! And you," now in front of the adipose black man, "I should put every one of these bullets in your goddamn fat guts for having them here. Anyone can see they are kids."

"They came to me at this house wanting to do this. If I had not let them stay, they would have gone somewhere else and done the same thing. I take care to see nobody beats any of them up, and I feed them three good meals a day. Blame me if you want, but you see they are not hurt in any way."

The only clothing the girls had in this room was a house dress and shoes. They said they would have to get their other belongings from another room and Houston told Russell to go with them. The room where they got their clothes was now vacant and the door open. Their cardboard suitcases were in the closet and both girls were busy filling them with their clothes and other small possessions. The three walked back into the hallway and Houston had put the gun in his pocket, and was still angry saying something to the black man.

"Let's go!" Houston commanded and waited until all the others had started down the stairway.

In the living room, the dances were still going and several more people were sitting on the couches and chairs than before.

One man, obviously over served, slurred, "I didn't know we could take the whores' home with us, Haywood." when he saw the girls, with their coats on, suitcases in hand,

leaving with the two men.

After the drunk's statement, Houston remembered he had been told the black man's name, Haywood.

The four went out into the night coolness and crossed the road to where the sedan was parked. The woman and child stayed in the front seat and Houston and the girls got in the back. Russell coasted the car off and let the clutch out starting the car.

Turning on the headlights, he then turned around in the tracks made by other motor vehicles that had done the same at the end of the street. Heading back up the hill to the main highway, so far, no one had spoken.

"Momma, what's that funny smell?" The child asked aloud.

It was a blend of cheap perfume, sweat, whisky, sex and unwashed bodies exuding from the girls.

"It's just a smell from the place daddy and Houston went in." She hoped the whispered answer would satisfy the child. "Why don't you try and sleep now, and we will be home soon."

The suggestion seemed to be what the child was waiting for, and he fell asleep on his mother's lap before they had driven another mile. .